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AUTHOR Sims, Edna N.
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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the crisis in the teaching of foreign languages brought on by the willingness of higher education institutions in the United States to discourage the study of foreign language as a general educational requirement. A questionnaire recently administered to the graduating class of a major university found that the courses students wished they had taken included foreign languages, literature, English, creative writing, science, and philosophy. Bearing in mind the questionnaire results, an attempt is made to evaluate the benefits of foreign language study for the population of the United States. The argument that the time spent learning a foreign language is disproportionate to the benefits received is shown to be false, and the effectiveness of foreign language knowledge in reducing provincialism is demonstrated. Foreign language study can enhance understanding of one's native language. World multilingualism should be accepted as a reality. Proficiency in a foreign language is also necessary for many graduate degrees and for successful communication in international politics. This proficiency is also rapidly becoming an indispensable job skill for many types of employment. (CLK)

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"The Importance of Foreign Languages for Today's Students"

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Edna N. Sims

Professor of Foreign Languages

University of the District of Columbia

1100 Harvard Street N. W.

Washington, D. C. 20009

This paper is intended as a thought provoking antidote to what the author perceives to be a crisis situation and is directed to those most able to administer the cure. The crisis to which we refer is evidenced in the willingness of the higher education institutions of the United States to discourage the study of foreign languages as a general education requirement. The administrators of higher education institutions, their students and prospective students, concerned United States government socio-economic and education agencies, and the community at large must

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take care not to precipitously eliminate a valuable skill-related discipline the benefits of which, once capriciously discarded, when the blunder is later recognized, may never be completely retrievable.

Though it is not difficult to understand the financial problems of economy minded college administrators who are compelled to operate with reduced budgets, nor the lament of students wishing to abbreviate their university sojourn, we deem it imperative to caution them that too narrowly specialized curricula inevitably result in provincialism. More importantly, students, as guardians, not only of their own education but also of that of their children, should be cognizant of the experiences of earlier graduated students who, as susceptible undergraduates, yielded to pressures advocating fewer "liberating" subjects. A recent survey[1] emanating from a questionnaire to the graduate class of a major university found that these students, in retrospect, felt the average college student was ill prepared to intelligently select a course of study for his future: "In their search for what was relevant, they were permitted to take what they thought they wanted and to avoid what they didn't want to take. It wasn't until their later years that they realized their mistake."[2]

The courses the surveyed students most frequently wished they had taken were six in all: foreign languages

(first place), literature, English, creative writing, science and philosophy. Bearing in mind that all but one of the above are selected from the humanities, let us alert ourselves to the "pros" and "cons" of the matter as it relates to the study of foreign languages, not necessarily as a major subject but, rather, as a general education requirement (approximately six semester hours above the elementary level) for all college students. Though we shall focus primarily on the student of the urban community, we shall attempt to evaluate the benefits for the total population of the United States.

The most frequent arguments against the study of foreign languages decry the time spent in acquiring the skill as disproportionate to the benefits received. It is said that students, on completing the foreign language requirement, obtain only a superficial knowledge of a discipline which they may never use and, to placate dissenting faculty members, patronizingly retort that the students who need foreign languages "will take them anyway." Although very few have dissected cats, frogs, earthworms, sheep's eyes or animal hearts since intermediate biology, the time spent can hardly be considered disproportionate to the benefits. The dictionary remains the perennial best seller

attesting to the fact that, after constant study from elementary school through college, one manages to attain only a superficial knowledge of one's own language. The foreign service of the United States defines a "useful knowledge" of a foreign language as the ability to handle everyday speech (with the aid of a dictionary) to read a newspaper and discuss a technical article in a particular field.[3] We view six semester hours above the elementary level as a springboard rather than a terminus; that is to say, there remains no great distance before this level of competence can be achieved.

Forward thinking students who recognize their need for foreign languages may not "take them anyway" for, though well intentioned they may be, they are like those of us who fail to keep our new year's resolutions beyond the month of January. Though the students of the large metropolitan areas pride themselves in being more sophisticated than their rural counterparts, they are, in their quest for equal voice in preparing their own college curricula, programming themselves and their peers, with the help of their easily yielding college faculty and administrators, to remain provincially oriented urbanites due to their eagerness to introduce curricula which afford them their diploma in the least possible time. Perhaps, for

their own sake, they will dare to be different if they can come to realize the irreparable harm they innocently heap upon themselves. Can the monolingual person ever really claim to be well educated? No, he cannot. Let us examine the provincialism which we seek to combat.

The urban college graduate, in addition to being a resident of a multilingual world, is surrounded daily in his own city by evidences of multilingualism and multiculturalism which he, knowing only his native language, is unable to perceive. Though he considers himself to be among the educated of the world, he is conspicuous in his limitations and, if he does travel, he cannot help advertising his single culture orientation. Upon studying even a single foreign language one simultaneously discovers that language expresses culture and helps the student to acquire tiny but constantly cumulative sensitivities which culminate in an awareness of humanity which cannot be gained in any other way.

Wether the administrator of a policy setting government agency, an institution of higher learning, a social agency, or big business, the person who fails to perceive the importance of foreign language study will negatively influence all with whom he has contact. Sadly, the most forceful perpetrators of urban provincialism are the educators who insist upon depriving those they

teach just because they themselves may not have had the exposure. They are missing the opportunity to understand the varied interests and psychological needs of students who must be encouraged to expand their own horizons rather than to become carbon copies of their classroom professors. One of the most grievous problems of the urban school in this century is seen in the failure of its students to write acceptable English. Even for college students English along with mathematics, science and other "difficult" disciplines, remains a subject in which even the native speaker fails to excell.

Many maintain one should, therefore, direct all one's efforts to the mastery of one's own language. What they fail to realize is that those who have difficulty with the English language should avail themselves of every possible opportunity to work with words, sentence structure, composition, oral expression and-- yes, even literature. A single language does not provide a sufficient range of verbal perceptiveness; indeed, there are things about English which one cannot learn in English: "The person who has never comprehended, spoken, read, or written a language other than his mother tongue has little or no perspective on his own language, particularly

its unique structure; he has never penetrated the rich areas of learning and experience lying beyond monolingual communication."[4] Just as one does not become a true musician until one knows more than a single instrument one cannot defend the validity of any "logic" based on language patterns which do not have universal validity. Similarly, one begins to understand one's own culture only when one learns to perceive the ramifications of another world culture. It is an error to consider travel as a substitute for language perception if one is ignorant of the written and spoken symbols with which a culture reveals itself.

Though the globe is shrinking-- America and Russia have already landed astronauts on the moon-- there are still long distance telephone operators in the United States who ask their customers how to spell "Santiago" and later inform them they cannot find it in the "African" directory; other operators cruelly threaten to charge extra when their bilingual customers interpret in the native language of the foreign operator names and numbers which she (the United States operator) would have been able to understand and pronounce with

even a minimal acquaintance with a foreign language. Students sitting on committees with learned administrators should not have to ask for a translation of "addenda" or "errata" of important memoranda. A student from Bolivia should not encounter a single American citizen who believes her country to be a city in Alaska. Department store clerks and restaurateurs ought to be able to give simple directions to their foreign visitors. When two people apply for a single position the one who has, in addition to the job requirements, the knowledge of a foreign language is the one most likely to be hired.

As long as United States housing inspectors complain: "Sometimes you can't explain (in Spanish) why you're there"[5] or public health medical personnel or social workers fail to bring medical services to the non native born, there will be a need for foreign languages. Even the trend towards including the history of America's minorities in today's textbooks can only be completely accomplished through the study of foreign languages: "Spanish archives certainly contain letters, diaries, and sundry accounts which will throw light, of racial importance, on the explorations

in the southwestern part of the United States. We remember Estevanico, called El Turco, who discovered the Grand Canyon of Colorado, and led expeditions into Arizona and New Mexico. There were Negroes with Balboa in the Pacific, Pizarro in Peru, Cortez in Mexico, and with other explorers in Guatemala, Chile and Venezuela. Nor should the memory lapse on the parts played in Cuban and Spanish history by Maceo, Ducasse, Bandera, Rabi and Gómez; in Venezuela by Páez, and in Brazil by Patrocino and Dias."[6]

The student wishing to pursue graduate study will need, in many instances, at least a reading knowledge of one foreign language for the Master's degree and two for the Doctorate. We do not believe it is the intention of most institutions of higher learning to restrict all students to a terminal bachelor's degree. Few will deny that the higher positions of leadership in any given field will continue to go to people with a broad liberal arts exposure which includes foreign languages rather than to those who have limited their proficiency to a single discipline. A knowledge of a single foreign language will give students the competitive edge.

Language enhances success in international politics. The key to communication with inhabitants of the third

world minimally includes Spanish, Portuguese, French and Arabic. Since seven eighths of the world population is non-English speaking and is, unfortunately, periodically engaged in various degrees of revolution, one cannot afford to depend upon interpreters whose sometimes erroneous or biased translations for a given situation can result in disaster: (Cited from Honig and Brod ; pp. 8-10, cited in my references)

a) Towards the end of World War II, before dropping the atomic bomb, the United States government offered Japan the opportunity to surrender. The United States translator interpreted the Japanese reply, "Mukusatsu" or "Witholding decision" as "offer rejected"-- an interpretation which, wether intentional or otherwise, resulted in the unnecessary death and maiming of at least hundreds of thousands.

b) The United States, undoubtedly the most powerful nation in the world, was embarassed to have to admit that Russia was able to launch Sputnik into orbit before her own scientists. The space experts of the United States had been in possession of the formula for at least two years before the Russian orbiting but had been unable to translate the document.

c) When a French diplomat appeared before the United Nations seeking financial aid, he used the verb "demander," meaning "to request" (Je demande l'aide") which was erroneously interpreted as to "Demand." The aid sought was, of course, refused as the ill-informed or biased spokesmen presented the courteous Frenchman as an arrogant bully.

Forward thinking world leaders such as Russia and Germany have long been aware that facility in a foreign language necessitates concentrated study over a long period of time. The average student, even before entering college, has studied at least one foreign language for ten years in Russia, and, in Germany, for six years. The average college freshman of the United States, however, has had only two years of a foreign language in high school. Research undertaken by members of the Modern Language Association[7] on the benefits of foreign languages in business, economics, finance, management, social science and government is especially pertinent. We conclude our paper underscoring their findings.

Today's job market is difficult; employers can afford to be highly selective. There are a number of jobs begging

for people with language skills to supplement other technical, business or professional talents. Our country has just begun trade with China; the Arab nations are emerging as critical links to the survival of our domestic economy; Latin America and the newly independent French and Portuguese speaking countries of Africa are providing more and more opportunites in commerce and industry. The executive and managerial positions in banking, finance, in the engineering and technical trades in radio and television, health services, travel and tourism, hotels, motels, the transportation industry, publishing, manufacturing, the foreign service and government will continue to see its market serviced or, indeed, "cornered" in the traditional manner by those who have availed themselves of opportunities for promotion, higher salaries and attractive assignments by developing an auxiliary skill in a foreign language.

Today's graduates should participate with the thousands of American businesses which buy and sell products across national boundaries bringing the value of world exports to approximately 400 billion dollars. Selling to consumers abroad requires a thorough acquaintance with the culture of a country-- its history, customs, media, language and social institutions. The traditionally successful United States representatives are those who have not allowed themselves

the costly and disadvantageous dependency upon interpreters for transacting their business. Some representative advertisements from the Sunday Classified Section of the New York Times[8] include:

- -An associate Vice President for a Middle Eastern office of a New York Bank with knowledge of French and Arabic.
- -Two Spanish-speaking auditors
- -One Spanish-speaking accountant
- -Two banking correspondents to work with customer accounts, with "knowledge of bank operations, letters of credit, or paying and receiving," plus fluency in French, German, or Italian
- -One Arabic-speaking territorial bank officer
- -A bank credit analyst with fluent French
- -A Spanish-speaking commercial lending officer to serve as a bank's area representative in South America
- -A bank credit analyst with fluency in Spanish and an accounting background for interpreting corporate and foreign bank credit data
- -A multilingual international banking administrative assistant
- -An international marketing and financial assistant with a technical degree and knowledge of at least one foreign language

The social sciences include the study of Economics, Political Science, Psychology, Social Welfare and Rehabilitation, Sociology, Anthropology, Urban Studies and Social Planning. Sociologists and anthropologists, who are involved in the study of the origins, cultures, traditions, languages, beliefs, values and social relationships of man must, in order to achieve any depth of understanding, be fluent in the language of the people they are studying. Political scientists, economists and urban planners study local, county, national and international governments and may be teachers or researchers for both private and government organizations. As advisors

to government officials, they must not restrict themselves to interpreting world events solely through the American perspective but must be aware of the cultural and political differences which are accrued through the study of language and culture in order to develop intelligent attitudes and policies. The Director of the Russian Institute at Columbia University, Marshall Shulman, maintains that this sort of narrow view was responsible for some major difficulties encountered during the Vietnamese war and that similar problems are likely to arise in our dealings with Russia and other nations where the language is not English:

> ...one reason we were not in a position to make sensible judgments about the issue as it arose in the middle nineteen-sixties is that in the entire country we did not have a handful of people who knew the language, the policies or the culture of Vietnam. Our decisions were made in ignorance.[9]

Most social service agencies are located in cities where there are concentrations of minority groups (100,000 Spanish speaking inhabitants in Washington, D. C. alone) and immigrants and need bilingual workers who can help with the problems of poverty, education, unemployment, child abuse, poor housing and illness. In social work and psychology, caseworkers, vocational counselors and supervisors cannot win the trust of their clients in local government agencies, schools, hospitals, rehabilitation centers and community action programs without knowing Spanish and the Spanish

culture which, we reiterate, are accrued through the study of a foreign language.

The United States federal government is the largest employer of individuals with foreign language skills both at home and abroad. Language proficiency is relevant for positions in the State Department, the Agency for International Development, the United States Information Agency, the Voice of America, the National Security Agency, the National Aeronautics and Space Agency, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Immigration and Naturalization Service, the Bureau of Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs, the Department of the Treasury's Foreign Claims Settlement Commission, the Central Intelligence Agency, the Peace Corps, Vista and the Head Start Programs of the Office of Economic Opportunity. In the foreign service alone, officers, after appointment, are expected to acquire an acceptable level of proficiency in at least one foreign language, while junior officers are limited to no more than one promotion until they do so. There remains no doubt that the federal government will continue to employ large numbers of today's graduates. Clearly, the applicant who has had some college training in at least one foreign language will be more able to compete for the more desirable positions.

There remains a ray of hope on the subject as long as students and educators are willing to open mindedly

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weigh the benefits of the study of foreign languages. Not too long ago the proficiency requirement in foreign languages was increased to raise the quality of the University of Kansas.[10] Should other forward thinking institutions do less? Our hats off to the Boards of Education across the United States who have expressed a desire for students in their respective jurisdictions t o become bilingual. We are certain they realize that America cannot afford to continue to tolerate the ignorance of the communication lack which breeds distrust, hatred, fear, war and lack of advancement both nationally and internationally. Let us lead our posterity to the citizen of-the-world status which will give them the added sense of self-respect, self-reliance, mental dignity and the intellectual worth they need to eliminate the all too prevalent vestiges of urban parocialism.

Insist on the continuation of foreign languages as a college wide requirement---- across the nation! This discipline is too important to be left to chance in the career of any. Enjoy the benefits accruing to Americans who include foreign languages in planning or upgrading their careers!

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